

Becoming a Kwoma

- 764 Kwoma culture defines the persons who shall dispose of and mourn for the dead. The relatives of the deceased gather to place his body on a platform where it is exposed for several months. Then the members of the subtribe attend a second funeral, for the ceremonial disposal of the bones, and a feast, after which the adult males celebrate the end of the mourning period at the house tamberan with gong, flute, and dance.
- 571 These, then, are the variously constituted groups and categories of persons as defined by Kwoma culture. They provide the framework into which a child is born and in terms of which he has to learn to act.
- 114 The hamlet in which our house was built, and hence the one from which we gathered most of our information, is called Rumbima. It is situated on a mountain ridge near the geographical center of Hongwan subtribe. (See map.) The men of Rumbima claim descent from the giant fish hawk and hence belong to the *Hayamakwo* sib. They divide themselves into two lineages, the larger claiming descent from the culture hero Mangwiow, and the smaller from Wasahof.
- 621 Mangwiow is reputed to have had five sons, each of whom sired a family line. Our house was built among the dwellings of the living descendants of these five brothers. The oldest living male in the line whose houses were nearest us was named Wof (household 1, family line 2).¹⁵ He dwelt a few yards from our hut with his first wife Kaya, his levirate wife Chinuwa, his adopted son Mey (a nephew), his adopted daughter Buka (a niece), and his stepson Kum (Chinuwa's son by her former husband). Wof is a man of about forty-five¹⁶ whose skin is grey and scaly from tinea. He has the reputation of being a powerful sorcerer.
- 621 Adjacent to Wof's house is the rather dilapidated dwelling.

¹⁵ Households are presented both on the map and on the household chart. Family lines may be found on the lineage chart.

¹⁶ Since the Kwoma had no method of counting years, the ages given are rough approximations based on the physical appearance of the individual and on his estimated age at the time of the tribe's first fleeting contact with Europeans, the members of the Behrmann expedition of 1913. (See W. Behrmann, *Im Stromgebiet des Nepik* [Berlin, 1922].)

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Once a Kwoma has passed through the initiatory ceremony he learns new restrictions on eating, assumes new economic responsibilities, and acquires new work habits. Although adolescents are for the most part subject to the same restrictions as children, eating at the same times and consuming the same food, there are some special food taboos which now apply for the first time. A boy may not eat fish for several months after his age-grade initiation. His blood, following the ceremonial cutting, is believed to flow down the stream into the lake and finally into the Sepik River, so that it contaminates the fish caught there. The taboo is thus supported by the Kwoma belief that to eat food contaminated by one's own blood is dangerous. Another restriction is the "voluntary" abstention by adolescent boys and girls from eating sago gruel for the period between the first and second funerals of a close relative. A third new limitation upon a boy's eating habits is associated with his sexual behavior. It is believed that if a male eats food cooked by any female with whom he has had sexual intercourse, he will sicken and perhaps die.⁴ Sickness is believed to result not only from eating food contaminated by one's own blood, but also from eating food contaminated by one's own sperm. When a woman cooks, any sperm which she has recently received is thought to contaminate the food. For these reasons an adolescent boy takes care not to get the harmful sperm back into his system by eating food cooked by a girl with whom he has philandered.⁵

When Kwoma youths have attained the status of an adolescent, they must assume new economic responsibilities. While they were children, their parents provided all the sago flour that was needed by the household, but now both sexes must share in the labor of collecting and preparing this staple. Since this is a task which involves the cooperation of a man and a woman, a *brother* and *sister* form a team and they produce together a supply of flour to supplement that prepared by the mother and father. It is the boy's duty to

⁴ This taboo also applies to adults with the exception of food cooked by a wife.

⁵ The effects of this belief on the sexual behavior of the Kwoma will be discussed later.

761 take them to the white court at Ambunti. The police officer
 754 will put them all in the calaboose for it." At the funeral the
 [648] next day, most of the talk was of sorcery. The reaction was
 [764] hysterical. A group of young men talked in loud excited
 [123] voices, expressing sentiments similar to those of Sof. They
 asked me to help them bring the culprit to justice at the
 white court. During the night following the death and for
 several days thereafter the anti-sorcery gong messages were
 sounded at intervals from the house tamberan of the de-
 ceased. His relatives redoubled their efforts to discover the
 sorcerer and to force him to end his machinations, for they
 feared that they might be the next to be affected by it.²² The
 people of Rumbima hamlet were still worrying because they
 had not yet discovered who had killed Gwiyap's father two
 years before. They suspected someone from Wanyi sib be-
 cause Gwiyap's father had prevented some of the young men
 of this sib from philandering with his sister.

602 The death of a relative not only increases a Kwoma's fear
 764 of sorcery, it also means the loss of one who has hitherto con-
 tributed to his support and defense or, if the deceased is a
 child, one who promises to do so. Hence relatives of the de-
 ceased react with real as well as with formalized sorrow. The
 wailing of the women is the most dramatic of these formal
 expressions of grief. As soon as the tolling of the gong an-
 nounces the death, they gather in the house where the corpse
 lies and start to cry in a long-drawn-out wail punctuated by
 short sobs on a lower note. A dozen or more women, each
 wailing in a slightly different key and sobbing at different
 intervals, produce a strange and moving sound. The women
 wail continuously until the following morning, when the de-
 ceased is placed on the burial platform. The male relatives
 show their sorrow by breaking their lime gourds on the shield
 which is used as a bier, and by pouring the contents over the
 • [765] corpse and their own heads. Close relatives, both male and
 female, smear their faces and sometimes their bodies with

²² Kwoma believe that one magical performance may kill not only the person from whom the food is stolen, but his close relatives as well, for they may also have had intimate contact with the sorcery material.

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clay or mud, and give up some preferred article in their diet during the interval between the first and second funeral ceremonies. Whether a person makes such manifestations of sorrow depends more on how close a bond of friendship or dependence he has established with the deceased than upon formal kinship ties. 602
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Beliefs about ghosts, as well as fear of sorcery and the feeling of bereavement, determine Kwoma death customs. It is thought that the ghosts of the relatives of the deceased come to escort his soul to the land of the dead. It is further believed that they are attracted by the corpse and hover near the body both while it is in the house and when it is on the funeral platform, and do not leave until the bleached bones are finally buried. If a Kwoma does not express sufficient sorrow for the death of a relative, the ghost of the deceased is likely to become angry and either frighten or possess the unappreciative man or woman. Thus those who are not motivated by personal feelings for the deceased may still mourn to avoid antagonizing his ghost. 775
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A corpse is allowed to lie in the house until a burial platform is built. Early in the morning of the day following the death, the relatives erect near the house of the deceased a covered platform set on stilts about ten feet from the ground. When it is finished, the corpse is placed upon a wooden shield carried by several of the male relatives and lifted to the platform with the aid of a ladder. The body is then washed, and three of the spears of the deceased are placed across the neck, abdomen, and legs and lashed to the floor of the platform to prevent the corpse from falling. The points of the spears are broken so that they will not be stolen. These rites are performed by any old man who is willing to play the rôle of undertaker. All who have had contact with the body wash themselves immediately as a prophylactic against the sickness which they believe would otherwise result. 764

A corpse is allowed to stay on the burial platform for several months. During this time the relatives who have chosen to go into mourning continue to fast and to daub themselves with clay. At the end of this time a second funeral is held, 765

- 765 and the bones, which are by this time dried and bleached by the weather, are taken from the platform and distributed to friends of the deceased. The best friend gets the mandible, the second best receives the clavicle, and the third best one of the arm bones. The oldest son inherits the femurs, which he may fashion into daggers. The remaining bones are buried under the floor of the house in which the deceased has lived. After the bones have been distributed, everyone who attends the funeral²⁷ joins in a big feast, which is a joyous occasion. Those who have fasted eat the food which they have denied themselves, and those who have worn clay wash. There is a great deal of joking and merriment, and when the meal is finished the men go to the nearest house tambaran, where they beat rhythms on the gongs, play the sacred flutes, dance, and sing. Only those males who have received their keloids are allowed to attend.²⁸

885 A Kwoma adult lives in an environment of people who
571 may cause him pain to an even greater extent than the natural and supernatural environments. They beat, insult, scold, punish, sorcerize, and even threaten to kill him. He has already had a long apprenticeship in learning to anticipate these pains. By adulthood, a Kwoma has learned to differentiate the various categories of relatives, non-relatives, and foreigners. Toward threats from each of these categories of persons he responds with acts which his culture defines as appropriate. If he does not do so, he may expect pain from another source, from those members of his society who sanction custom.

885 A man's parents and paternal uncles and aunts still com-
593 mand and punish him as they did when he was a child. Now
602 the punishments take the form of scolding and criticism, as

²⁷ Everyone in the subtribe is usually invited.

²⁸ A young man from a neighboring tribe who was not yet scarified was severely beaten and almost killed for entering the house tambaran at such a time. This man had killed his wife with an adz in a fit of rage and had fled from his own tribe to escape the wrath of his wife's relatives, taking refuge with his mother's relatives at Jlongwan. The Kwoma all considered him crazy, and indeed he did exhibit some psychotic symptoms. It is probable that these circumstances were in part responsible for the beating he received.

602 A man calls his mother's *brother's* daughter by the *mother*
[601] term. Her behavior toward him is supposed to be "motherly." She cooks for him if he visits the hamlet in which she lives, and behaves as kindly as she can toward him. All the persons whom I observed in this reciprocal relationship were warm and friendly, but contacts were not frequent.

A man has but little contact with his *father's sister*, since she marries out of his hamlet. When they do meet, however, the man theoretically behaves toward her as he does toward his *father*. Actually, the relationship is friendly.

572 A Kwoma's *friends* are of considerable importance to him.
608 It will be remembered that this pseudo-kin relationship is

[881] established with the young men whose blood is mixed with his at the time of initiation into adulthood. A man's *friends*, usually three in number, are always members of another sib and unrelated to him by any true kinship ties, but after he has established blood bonds with them he treats them as though

[574] they were real relatives. He may eat at their house or invite
[754] them to eat at his, without fear that they will steal sorcery material from him. He supports them at court meetings, and in return they stand by him against those who threaten or accuse him; they may even take his side if he has a dispute with their own relatives.⁴³ He is supposed to steal sorcery

materials from members of his own hamlet if he is requested to do so by a *friend*, and he may ask the same favor in return. A man calls his *friends'* parents *father* and *mother*, their sisters *sister*, and their children *children* and behaves toward them as he does toward such relatives; incest taboos
• [765] apply to their close female relatives. When he dies, various of his bones are inherited by his friends or their heirs to
[754] symbolize the close bond between them. No economic co-operation is expected between these blood brothers; the relationship functions primarily in the defensive-aggressive sphere and is closely integrated with the sorcery complex.

608 Every Kwoma has two other pseudo-kin relatives, a *cere-*

⁴³ A man is theoretically supposed to support his *friend* in preference to anyone outside his immediate family. I am not sure whether he does this in practice.

*Supernatural Beliefs*217 121
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Kwoma beliefs about ghosts form part of the charter of the funeral cult. Whenever a person is on the point of death, ghosts are believed to hover around in order to carry the soul to the land of the dead. After death they are believed to guard the body during the months that it is exposed on a platform, until the time when the bones are finally buried under the floor of the dwelling and distributed to the relatives and friends. The funeral cult functions directly to provide a means of expressing grief. It is at the first funeral ceremony, which begins when the person dies and ends after the corpse has been deposited on the platform, that the female relatives wail, and that the male relatives talk emotionally of their friendship with the deceased and express their hatred of those responsible for his death.¹⁹ Second, this institution provides an opportunity for mourning. Relatives of the deceased daub themselves with mud and deny themselves some article of diet. Finally, the funeral cult provides for the disposal of the corpse, and thus functions to prevent sickness from contagion. The cult also has integrative functions in that it supports the relationship between relatives and friends through the distribution of the bones of the deceased at the time of the second funeral. The second funeral also provides an opportunity for a meeting of the members of the yam cult. Thus, were Kwoma teachers to allow pupils to disbelieve in ghosts, a new rationale would have to be discovered for the funeral cult or its functions would have to be taken over by some other institution. [765] • [789]

Besides furnishing a reason for funeral practices, the belief in ghosts provides an explanation for strange noises at night and for dreams, and thus affords a rationale for action. When a Kwoma hears a strange noise at night, he rushes into the nearest house, closes the door, and shouts imprecations and curses at the ghosts, commanding them to return to the land of the dead. He often beats the air with sticks to strengthen his commands. If he has a nightmare he resorts to similar practices; the women may wail and beg the [775] [121] [182] [789]

¹⁹ All deaths are believed to be caused by sorcery.

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Yesterday while John worked with Yat on sib history I went over the mountain to Wenyabunkura where the final burial of a man's second wife was being held. It was a cheerful gathering in marked contrast to the primary funeral of a Bangus man written of before. The ceremony has been going on for three days-- preparation of food by the women, breaking down the burial platform and burying the skeleton under the eaves of her husband's house, etc., beating the gongs and blowing the flutes in the house tambaran by the initiated men. Much of this had gone on before we were told of the event. It was ten months to a year ago that the woman died.

In the morning a crowd of 50 or 60 men, women and children are gathered at the widower's house. My informant and interpreter is Kar, of Rumbina, who has been up all night beating gongs. He is sleepy and hungry but is very good at pointing out what is going on. The widower, Yafamangwiya, greets me cordially and dubs me naramboy. He sits on the ground just before his house. The porch is packed with women and girls all sitting and waiting for food to be distributed. Men are busy laying out boiled sago bricks and pieces of roast pig on large breadfruit leaves. Yafamangwiya points out to me most of his relations and what he calls them-- also what I am to call them, until my head is spinning. Then he leaves me to give his ruwa (niece, in this case) a bite of sago, thus breaking the taboo which has been placed on boiled sago for this and other relations.

After each of the women has received two or three parcels of food amidst a hubub of advice from these men who are not taking part in the distribution, the party breaks up. The women and children return home while the men and semi-initiated boys run for the house tambaran to "fight the garamut" and blow the flutes. This is done, I am told, because the men are sorry for the woman who is dead. But they are all having a wonderful time expressing their

765 sorrow. Six gongs ranging in size from 4' to 10' to 12' are beaten with
533 tremendous vim. Each man has two strikers, one in either hand. With the
534 left they keep up a light and rapid beat while with the right they pound out
the changes according to a prearranged score. From the discussions and
humming which go on before a round is played, I think that these may be made up
on the spur of a new idea. The pair of flutes, on the other hand, plays duets
which are stereotyped. Two duets that I have, rather simple ones, are
said to represent the flying fox and a small white pigeon.

As for recording the garamut 'talk' and beating of the hand drums,
we are at a loss as to how to record them. The rhythm seems like no rhythm at
all and even when it is tapped out on a table we soon get lost in a mass of
short, long and intermediate beats.

124 Our houseboys are serving as occasional informants so that we can get
some sort of a comparative picture. John has done some work on language and
I have a kinship system of sorts. The boys are not too long on memory but
114 their wives are better informed. We are going to Yambon for a few days just
before Christmas to trace down various connections with that culture which we
have come across here. There are three or four other places around and about
which we hope to visit. We have a plan which might be valuable to other
field workers who might consider coming to New Guinea. This is to gather all
the information that we can about places and cultures of this section of the
Territory where work could be done. Mr. Eve gave us a good start with all that
he knew at first hand.

461 We find so far that it is well nigh impossible to make appointments with
informants. This is not because the men are lazy and sit about all day-- on
the contrary they strike us as being an exceedingly industrious people. Too
much so for the arm chair field worker. But then it's all to the good to
beard them in their own dens if we can find them at home.

794 partly by the fact that membership in the two cults is maintained at an
 [241] approximate equality. These cults are connected with yams in that the
 cults are thought to be essential to the growth of these vegetables, and
 [534] they are held two yam plantings apart. The second stage is the nohwi which
 [241] introduces mysteries of the water drum to its members. This is also
 connected with yams in that the young men are initiated into this only
 after they have planted their first yams--itself a sacred rite.

754 Black magic is constantly being practiced and everyone in the culture
 is always careful of food leavings and blood which are the two most important
 [182] materials for the hands of the operator. This belief is very strongly
 [154] integrated in the culture and seems to function in the expression of
 aggressions and to offer a readymade explanation of neurotic anxiety.

775 The dfad dwell on the top of a nearby mountain in a topsyturvy
 existence. These ghosts chase and frighten people at night but do not kill
 them. They sometimes take the form of a bird or animal in the day time.

In particular they hover around a dead man, for their job is to escort him

[764] to the land of the dead. (There is a double funeral, first an exposure
 [765] on platform and secondly, burial of bones beneath floor of the house.)

776 There are other types of supernatural creatures who dwell in rocks,
 waterholes, etc., in the guise of snakes. They cause wind, rain, thunder,
 lightning and the rainbow, and are dangerous to man in that if they are
 disturbed they will shoot him with a sago needle which is painful but not
 [794] fatal. These beings are associated with the men's cult. The uninitiated
 are told that the esoteria are made and operated by these creatures.

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128 This is the bare outline of the culture in itself incomplete. Some of
 the interstices and interrelations we have the information to fill in and
 others we have not.

695 spear. He would finish his speech with an accusation against Wanyi or
754 Hayamakro. This would be answered by members of these sibs. Wof and Way,
and to some extent War were spokes men for Hayamakro.

The chief accusation seemed to rest on Afelawanj, who wasn't there.
The gong was beaten, but he still did not come. Sowinambi had accused him
before the talk and it was said he was afraid to come. The talking went on

[264] until I left about 11:00. It had calmed down to almost nothing by the time
I left, and many of the younger men were growling because they were not

[123] passing out the food yet. When I left I was given a piece of pig.

123 My friend from Tangwishamp visited and asked for matches, etc., for
[434] which he gave me some betel pepper. He asked me to go to Afokalis with him

[765] (to get me out of the way), so I went. On the way, we passed War's.

War was covered with mud. He said it was because he was mourning for his
father. My friend and I went down to Afokalis, where a group was gathered

[521] in the house tambaran talking about the Sowinambi poisoning. We came back
[754] and stopped in at War's. Qwiyp and Mar did not want me to leave. A

[262] large group had gathered from all the sibs except Afokalis. They were
cutting up dog and distributing it. It turned out that the real reason for

[593] War's mourning was that he had gone alone to Yelagu to get his wife back,
[628] but had not succeeded. He had been given pay in shells and a pig, and had

not wanted me to know about it because, he was not sure that he wasn't

648 going to Yelagu to kill them. There was loud-talk from the house tambaran
721 that evening, and Mar said they were all bemusing the fact that the police
had come, so they could not go and wipe out the Yelagu.

224 March 2, 1937. Yat came up this noon and said that he had made a blind
for catching pig in his sage patch near Ambunti. He went there the other
day and found that Buiyampa and Doweri and Mawandaya had broken it and

March 4, 1937.

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Owiyp had a dream last night that Bob Overall had come and that I was to go with him. He asked Owiyp if he were going with him, to which Owiyp replied, "no." Bob gave him two shillings and a bottle of peroxide. I told him to give them back, for I was his master and would instead give it to him.

March 8, 1937.

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Owiyp inherited Yatafauf as a naramboi (friend) but chose Amasey. When a friend dies, the number 1 naramboi gets the jaw bone; number 2 the clavicle; and number 3 the arm bone.

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Kawas came in this morning with an erection. Owiyp said that if a woman saw him thus she would slap his penis with her hand or with a stick. Girls may beat their brothers when they have an erection. If an adult has an erection in front of females he would be very ashamed.

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Owiyp reports that Mar's fiancée has not cooked for him yet and that he has not had intercourse with her. He does not like her nor do any of the others in the household, but she says she does not want to leave; she says she likes Mar and does not want to marry anyone else. Mar wishes he were married now, for May's son, who is younger than he is already married.
March 23, 1937.

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When Owiyp was a child Mar made a house in the woods where they would play. Mar would steal yams from his father and they would cook them. Owiyp would steal tobacco for them to smoke. Girls would not come there. They would cut nodes of bamboo and play at beating a gong. Their fathers would warn them to look out that they were not sorcerised by sumga kapa (black magic). Their mothers were within calling distance of them (the houses were built near home.)